

Vietnam's 'Pacification' Is Tougher Than It Looked at Honolulu

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, Sept. 24 — The rural pacification plan in South Vietnam is behind schedule, even on paper. When viewed with the coldest realism in the countryside, it is still further behind schedule.

The aim of the pacification, or reconstruction, plan is to take country hamlets away from the Vietcong and return them to control of the Saigon Government. It also is supposed to improve hamlet life through development projects and to institute democratic village government. At least half the countryside away from the cities is said to be under Vietcong control.

At the Honolulu conference last February, when the 1966 plan was studied by delegations from South Vietnam and the United States, a goal was set for the year to "pacify" about 2,000 rural hamlets, representing about 14 per cent of the population. Slightly less than 1,000 were to be hamlets previously under Vietcong control, which were to be freshly pacified or "con-

structed." Slightly more than 1,000 were to be hamlets that had previously undergone pacification work and needed "consolidation."

This was, however, not the real goal. Maj. Gen. Nguyen Duc Thang, the minister of "revolutionary development" (or pacification), explained that the real hope was to achieve at least 70 per cent of these goals in each province. Province chiefs pledged to do so.

RECONSTRUCTION

According to a recent report issued in Washington by Robert W. Komer, President Johnson's special assistant for Vietnamese pacification, 531 hamlets inhabited by 580,000 persons "entered" the pacification program in the first six months of the year. Of these, 195 were described as hamlets previously under Vietcong control.

Unless this rate of progress is increased in the last six months, even the 70 per cent goal cannot be met. The total of previously hostile Vietcong hamlets pacified will fall more than 300 short. The total of old hamlets needing "consolidation" will fall about 300 short.

Actually, the situation is even worse than painted by Mr. Komer, who said that progress was, on the whole, "impressive."

There are in operation now 431 pacification teams with varying training. Of these, 81 are 59-man teams that this year received improved training in the new 1966 concepts of how to pacify rural hamlets. Five thousand workers graduated from training schools this month.

No one expected perfection, but

the performance of many teams has been marginal. One hard-bitten source estimates that only two out of five teams are effective. A more optimistic source guesses it might be seven out of 12.

Responsible South Vietnamese officials have, in official studies, found considerable fault with performance. Recruiting requirements were met "in quantity but not in quality," one source said. This same source added that "cadres (the noun is used in the singular

by Vietnamese) were not enthusiastic toward their work and toward the aspiration of the people." Above all, these studies said, some teams failed in the most vital task of all—that of creating genuine enthusiasm and trust among the hamlet residents.

Pacification is a very complex task. Under the present concepts, the armed teams enter a hamlet and attempt to return it to government control by a series of measures. One is to make a census and

and political check of the population and then to interview each resident privately at intervals of about 10 to 15 days.

In this so-called "census grievance" process, the team is expected first to identify the legitimate complaints of the population and their aspirations and to make a start toward solving these problems. Then, presumably, the residents will begin to identify and help root out the underground, Communist, Vietcong "infrastructure" of the hamlet.

In a statistically "pacified" hamlet, this underground is supposed to have been identified and eliminated, either by political persuasion or arrest or death. Yet, in some hamlets that make up the total in Mr. Komer's report, the Vietcong continued to collect taxes and carry out propaganda, official Vietnamese sources said.

As for democratic hamlet government and development projects, by mid-year, most hamlet officials were still those appointed by the teams and not elected, sources said. According to one study, many development projects were too grandiose and were imposed on the hamlet residents without due regard to their "aspirations."

Some province chiefs moved teams from difficult hamlets to easy hamlets to "improve performance scores." In other cases, the same hamlet was "pacified" over and over again, cluttering the statistical charts with several good marks whereas it had never really been pacified.

This is only a partial catalogue of failures and errors, sources said. None of the errors, however, need be fatal. The really "impressive" thing about the program so far has not been the progress but the intellectual honesty of the Vietnamese officials themselves. Never before in the history of the Vietnam conflict have important leaders been so willing to admit failings, and, therefore, been so well able to insist that corrective action be taken.

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